

**Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799,  
with Draft, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in  
Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited  
by Paul Leicester Ford.**

**TO ELBRIDGE GERRY J. MSS.**

Philadelphia, Jan 26. 1799.

My Dear Sir, —Your favor of Nov. 12 was safely delivered to me by mr. Binney, but not till Dec. 28, as I arrived here only three days before that date. It was received with great satisfaction. Our very long intimacy as fellow-laborers in the same cause, the recent expressions of mutual confidence which had preceded your mission, the interesting course which that had taken, & particularly & personally as it regarded yourself, made me anxious to hear from you on your return. I was the more so too, as I had myself during the whole of your absence, as well as since your return, been a constant butt for every shaft of calumny which malice & falsehood could form, & the presses, public speakers, or private letters disseminate. One of these, too, was of a nature to touch yourself; as if, wanting confidence in your efforts, I had been capable of usurping powers committed to you, & authorizing negotiations private & collateral to yours. The real truth is, that though Dr Logan, the pretended missionary, about 4. or 5. days before he sailed for Hamburgh, told me he was going there, & thence to Paris, & asked & received from me a certificate of his citizenship, character, & circumstances of life, merely as a protection, should he be molested on his journey, in the present turbulent & suspicious state of Europe, yet I had been led to consider his object as relative to his private affairs; and tho', from an intimacy of some standing, he knew well my wishes for peace and my political sentiments in general, he nevertheless received then no particular declaration of them, no authority to communicate

## Library of Congress

them to any mortal, nor to speak to any one in my name, or in anybody's name, on that, or on any other subject whatever; nor did I write by him a scrip of a pen to any person whatever. This he has himself honestly & publicly declared since his return; & from his well-known character & every other circumstance, every candid man must perceive that his enterprise was dictated by his own enthusiasm, without consultation or communication with any one; that he acted in Paris on his own ground, & made his own way. Yet to give some color to his proceedings, which might implicate the republicans in general, & myself particularly, they have not been ashamed to bring forward a suppositious paper, drawn by one of their own party in the name of Logan, and falsely pretended to have been presented by him to the government of France; counting that the bare mention of my name therein, would connect that in the eye of the public with this transaction. In confutation of these and all future calumnies, by way of anticipation, I shall make to you a profession of my political faith; in confidence that you will consider every future imputation on me of a contrary complexion, as bearing on its front the mark of falsehood & calumny.

I do then, with sincere zeal, wish an inviolable preservation of our present federal constitution, according to the true sense in which it was adopted by the States, that in which it was advocated by it's friends, & not that which it's enemies apprehended, who therefore became it's enemies; and I am opposed to the monarchising it's features by the forms of it's administration, with a view to conciliate a first transition to a President & Senate for life, & from that to a hereditary tenure of these offices, & thus to worm out the elective principle. I am for preserving to the States the powers not yielded by them to the Union, & to the legislature of the Union it's constitutional share in the division of powers; and I am not for transferring all the powers of the States to the general government, & all those of that government to the Executive branch. I am for a government rigorously frugal & simple, applying all the possible savings of the public revenue to the discharge of the national debt; and not for a multiplication of officers & salaries merely to make partisans, & for increasing, by every device, the public debt, on the principle of it's being a public blessing. I am for relying, for internal defence, on our militia solely, till actual

## Library of Congress

invasion, and for such a naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors from such depredations as we have experienced; and not for a standing army in time of peace, which may overawe the public sentiment; nor for a navy, which, by it's own expenses and the eternal wars in which it will implicate us, grind us with public burthens, & sink us under them. I am for free commerce with all nations; political connection with none; & little or no diplomatic establishment. And I am not for linking ourselves by new treaties with the quarrels of Europe; entering that field of slaughter to preserve their balance, or joining in the confederacy of kings to war against the principles of liberty. I am for freedom of religion, & against all manœuvres to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another: for freedom of the press, & against all violations of the constitution to silence By force & not by reason the complaints or criticisms, just or unjust, of our citizens against the conduct of their agents. And I am for encouraging the progress of science in all it's branches; and not for raising a hue and cry against the sacred name of philosophy; for awing the human mind by stories of raw-head & bloody bones to a distrust of its own vision, & to repose implicitly on that of others; to go backwards instead of forwards to look for improvement; to believe that government, religion, morality, & every other science were in the highest perfection in ages of the darkest ignorance, and that nothing can ever be devised more perfect than what was established by our forefathers. To these I will add, that I was a sincere well-wisher to the success of the French revolution, and still wish it may end in the establishment of a free & well-ordered republic; but I have not been insensible under the atrocious depredations they have committed on our commerce. The first object of my heart is my own country. In that is embarked my family, my fortune, & my own existence. I have not one farthing of interest, nor one fibre of attachment out of it, nor a single motive of preference of any one nation to another, but in proportion as they are more or less friendly to us. But though deeply feeling the injuries of France, I did not think war the surest means of redressing them. I did believe, that a mission sincerely disposed to preserve peace, would obtain for us a peaceable & honorable settlement & retribution; and I appeal to you to say, whether this might not have been obtained, if either of your colleagues had been of the same sentiment with yourself.

## Library of Congress

These, my friend, are my principles; they are unquestionably the principles of the great body of our fellow citizens, and I know there is not one of them which is not yours also. In truth, we never differed but on one ground, the funding system; and as, from the moment of it's being adopted by the constituted authorities, I became religiously principled in the sacred discharge of it to the uttermost farthing, we are united now even on that single ground of difference.

I turn now to your inquiries. The enclosed paper<sup>1</sup> will answer one of them. But you also ask for such political information as may be possessed by me, & interesting to yourself in regard to your embassy. As a proof of my entire confidence in you, I shall give it fully & candidly. When Pinckney, Marshall,

<sup>1</sup> The paper was as follows:

“Yeas Nays Langdon Livermore N. H. Goodhue Sedgwick Mas Bradford Foster R. I. Hillhouse Tracy Con. Paine Tichenor Verm. Laurence N. Y. Rutherford N. J. Bingham Ross Pens. Latimer Del. Howard Mar. Tazewell Mason Va. Bloodworth Martin N. C. Hunter Reade S. C. Tatnell G. Blount Cocke Ten. Brown Marshall Kentuck.” and Dana, were nominated to settle our differences with France, it was suspected by many, from what was understood of their dispositions, that their mission would not result in a settlement of differences, but would produce circumstances tending to widen the breach, and to provoke our citizens to consent to a war with that nation, & union with England. Dana's resignation & your appointment gave the first gleam of hope of a peaceable issue to the mission. For it was believed that you were sincerely disposed to accommodation; & it was not long after your arrival there, before symptoms were observed of that difference of views which had been suspected to exist. In the meantime, however, the aspect of our government towards the French republic had become so ardent, that the people of America generally took the alarm. To the southward their apprehensions were early excited. In the Eastern States also, they at length began to break out. Meetings were held in many of your towns, & addresses to the government agreed on in opposition to war.

## Library of Congress

The example was spreading like a wildfire. Other meetings were called in other places, & a general concurrence of sentiment against the apparent inclinations of the government was imminent; when, most critically for the government, the despatches of Octr 22, prepared by your colleague Marshall, with a view to their being made public, dropped into their laps. It was truly a God-send to them, & they made the most of it. Many thousands of copies were printed & dispersed gratis, at the public expence; & the zealots for war co-operated so heartily, that there were instances of single individuals who printed & dispersed 10. or 12,000 copies at their own expence. The odiousness of the corruption supposed in those papers excited a general & high indignation among the people. Unexperienced in such manoeuvres, they did not permit themselves even to suspect that the turpitude of private swindlers might mingle itself unobserved, & give it's own hue to the communications of the French government, of whose participation there was neither proof nor probability. It served, however, for a time, the purpose intended. The people, in many places, gave

a loose to the expressions of their warm indignation, & of their honest preference of war to dishonor. The fever was long & successfully kept up, and in the meantime, war measures as ardently crowded. Still, however, as it was known that your colleagues were coming away, and yourself to stay, though disclaiming a separate power to conclude a treaty, it was hoped by the lovers of peace, that a project of treaty would have been prepared, *ad referendum*, on principles which would have satisfied our citizens, & overawed any bias of the government towards a different policy. But the expedition of the *Sophia*, and, as was supposed, the suggestions of the person charged with your despatches, & his probable misrepresentations of the real wishes of the American people, prevented these hopes. They had then only to look forward to your return for such information. either through the Executive, or from yourself, as might present to our view the other side of the medal. The despatches of Oct 22, 97, had presented one face. That information, to a certain degree, is now received, & the public will see from your correspondence with Taleyrand, that France, as you testify, "was sincere and anxious to obtain a reconciliation, not wishing us to break the British treaty, but only to give her equivalent stipulations; and in general was

## Library of Congress

disposed to a liberal treaty." And they will judge whether mr. Pickering's report shews an inflexible determination to believe no declarations the French government can make, nor any opinion which you, judging on the spot & from actual view, can give of their sincerity, and to meet their designs of peace with operations of war. The alien & sedition acts have already operated in the South as powerful sedatives of the X. Y. Z. inflammation. In your quarter, where violations of principle are either less regarded or more concealed, the direct tax is likely to have the same effect, & to excite inquiries into the object of the enormous expences & taxes we are bringing on. And your information supervening, that we might have a liberal accommodation if we would, there can be little doubt of the reproduction of that general movement, by the despatches of Oct. 22. And tho' small checks & stops, like Logan's pretended embassy, may be thrown in the way from time to time, & may a little retard it's motion, yet the tide is already turned, and will sweep before it all the feeble obstacles of art. The unquestionable republicanism of the American mind will break through the mist under which it has been clouded, and will oblige it's agents to reform the principles & practices of their administration.

You suppose that you have been abused by both parties. As far as has come to my knowledge, you are misinformed. I have never seen or heard a sentence of blame uttered against you by the republicans; unless we were so to construe their wishes that you had more boldly co-operated in a project of a treaty, and would more explicitly state, whether there was in your colleagues that flexibility, which persons earnest after peace would have practised? Whether, on the contrary, their demeanor was not cold, reserved, and distant, at least, if not backward? And whether, if they had yielded to those informal conferences which Taleyrand seems to have courted, the liberal accommodation you suppose might not have been effected, even with their agency? Your fellow-citizens think they have a right to full information, in a case of such great concern to them. It is their sweat which is to earn all the expences of the war, and their blood which is to flow in expiation of the causes of it. It may be in your power to save them from these miseries by full communications and unrestrained details, postponing motives of delicacy to those of duty. It rests for you to

## Library of Congress

come forward independently; to take your stand on the high ground of your own character; to disregard calumny, and to be borne above it on the shoulders of your grateful fellow citizens; or to sink into the humble oblivion, to which the Federalists (self-called) have secretly condemned you; and even to be happy if they will indulge you with oblivion, while they have beamed on your colleagues meridian splendor. Pardon me, my dear Sir, if my expressions are strong. My feelings are so much more so, that it is with difficulty I reduce them even to the tone I use. If you doubt the dispositions towards you, look into the papers, on both sides, for the toasts which were given throughout the States on the 4th of July. You will there see whose hearts were with you, and whose were ulcerated against you. Indeed, as soon as it was known that you had consented to stay in Paris, there was no measure observed in the execrations of the war party. They openly wished you might be guillotined, or sent to Cayenne, or anything else. And these expressions were finally stifled from a principle of policy only, & to prevent you from being urged to a justification of yourself. From this principle alone proceed the silence and cold respect they observe towards you. Still, they cannot prevent at times the flames bursting from under the embers, as Mr. Pickering's letters, report, & conversations testify, as well as the indecent expressions respecting you, indulged by some of them

in the debate on these despatches. These sufficiently show that you are never more to be honored or trusted by them, and that they await to crush you for ever, only till they can do it without danger to themselves.

When I sat down to answer your letter, but two courses presented themselves, either to say nothing or everything; for half confidences are not in my character. I could not hesitate which was due to you. I have unbosomed myself fully; & it will certainly be highly gratifying if I receive like confidence from you. For even if we differ in principle more than I believe we do, you & I know too well the texture of the human mind, & the slipperiness of human reason, to consider differences of opinion otherwise than differences of form or feature. Integrity of views more than their soundness, is the basis of esteem. I shall follow your direction in conveying this by a private hand; tho' I know not as yet when one worthy of

## Library of Congress

confidence will occur. And my trust in you leaves me without a fear that this letter, meant as a confidential communication of my impressions, will ever go out of your hand, or be suffered in anywise to commit my name. Indeed, besides the accidents which might happen to it even under your care, considering the accident of death to which you are liable, I think it safest to pray you, after reading it as often as you please, to destroy at least the 2d & 3d leaves. The 1st contains principles only, which I fear not to avow; but the 2d & 3d contain facts stated for your information, and which, though sacredly conformable to my firm belief, yet would be galling to some, & expose me to illiberal attacks. I therefore repeat my prayer to burn the 2d & 3d leaves. And did we ever expect to see the day, when, breathing nothing but sentiments of love to our country & it's freedom & happiness, our correspondence must be as secret as if we were hatching it's destruction! Adieu, my friend, and accept my sincere & affectionate salutations. I need not add my signature.